

# PEACE THROUGH AIR POWER

Condensed from  
a chapter of a forthcoming book

Major Alexander P. de Seversky

**I**N A WORLD that has not yet learned to dispense with force, our ardent hope is that our military strength will prevent war. The important question is, *What kind of strength?*

Mere quantity in armed men and weapons will not serve. If war comes, the enemy will have at his disposal teeming populations, and possibly vast resources of the whole Eurasian continent. American strategy must therefore gear to *quality* rather than *quantity*.

Fortunately, we have within our grasp a strategy that meets this condition. It is uniquely suited to American genius and capacity. It is the strategy of air power.

But what *kind* of air power? The assumption that a lot of indiscriminate planes — a 70-group Air Force, a huge naval air arm, a tactical air force supporting an army, Marine aviation, Coast Guard aviation — add up to *air power* is wrong. A country may possess swarms of air-

craft, yet be deficient in air power, as Hitler and Tojo learned too late.

True air power means a strategic striking force that can rise from our own American continent for direct assault against the industrial solar plexus of the enemy and return to its home bases. It means aviation freed from dependence on overseas bases.

The creation of such an aerial force is fully possible. It calls for no new inventions; the necessary aircraft are already in the skies, but we are not building enough of them. What is more, this air power can be created as soon as, if not sooner than, the mountains of equipment on land, sea and in the air now proposed.

Instead of continuing to spread our limited man power and resources thin in all three elements, the proposed air strategy would concentrate on the decisive weapon for clean-cut superiority in the decisive element. By reducing sharply the roles of armies and navies, the fearful drain on men and materials can be stopped, the crushing burden of

military expenditures can be eased.

With control of the air ocean enveloping the whole globe in our hands — the test and purpose of adequate air power — our position would be analogous to Great Britain's in the last century. A small island off Europe in effect gave mankind a century of peace, the *Pax Britannica*. It did this without militarizing or regimenting its people. This miracle was possible because Britain did not attempt to be strong on land and sea at the same time. Living in an era when water was the decisive medium for carrying destruction to enemies, Britain channeled practically its entire military potential into sea power, attaining command of the seas through an invincible fleet.

Today the air has become the primary medium of global power. An air force capable of commanding the skies can enforce its will on everything below. If we hold our effort on land and sea to a minimum and channel our resources into long-range air power, we likewise can be incomparably strong without the risk of military regimentation. When we muster the intellectual courage to face the new power equation, we can have a century of peace. Not a *Pax Americana* but a *Pax Democratica*, in partnership with all other free nations.

It sounds incredible today, but more than two years after the outbreak of World War II, and months after America was in it, bomber air-

craft were still at the bottom of the priority lists! The men who were then — and for the most part are still — in charge of our military destinies looked on them as "an unwarranted luxury." For these generals and admirals the unfolding struggle was merely a continuation, with modern trimmings, of the surface strategy of World War I.

That grim spectacle of stubborn inertia left airmen like myself no alternative but to speak out vigorously.\* I believed an enlightened public opinion could serve as a corrective on the natural conservatism of a great military establishment rooted in tradition. That faith was amply justified.

Today it is again a deep anxiety for the state of our national security that moves me to write. The moment is crucial because we are now in the first stages of a large-scale rearmament. The plans now being shaped up, if allowed to congeal, cannot easily be undone. They will commit us irrevocably.

It would be against nature to expect the elder services to make a strategy decision amounting to an order for their own demotion to secondary roles. It is the American people who must determine the military course through their Congress and their President. They must choose between the profligate land-sea-air strategy of the recent past and the inter-hemispheric air strategy opened up by modern aeronautics.

\* See "Victory Through Air Power," *The Reader's Digest*, July, '42.

### Seversky's Fighting Record

WHEN President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met for their historic conference at Quebec in 1943, the crucial issue was an invasion of Europe. Moscow was clamoring for a "second front"; Roosevelt was amenable to the idea despite the risks. The Prime Minister, however, knew what it meant to operate against superior German air power.

When Churchill learned that the President had not yet seen Walt Disney's picture *Victory Through Air Power*, based on Major Alexander P. de Seversky's book, he had it shown. The picture explained graphically that invasion was not possible until the defending air forces were neutralized. It was later reported that this visualized argument was influential in assuring control of the skies over Western Europe by Allied air power on invasion day. Major Seversky's brilliant analysis of the situation undoubtedly saved thousands of American lives.

Denounced as an extremist and hailed as a prophet, Seversky has proved himself to be one of the world's foremost aeronautical experts. Early in the war he saw clearly what has since become manifest to nearly everybody: that air power had supplanted sea power as the main weapon of modern warfare. Grim proof of this assertion came suddenly with the sinking of the two "impregnable" British battleships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, by Japanese aviation.

Almost alone among commentators, Major Seversky predicted a British victory in the Battle of Britain. When pessimism was deepest, he dared reiterate that the defenders "have an advantage over the Germans due to the superior performance of their pursuit airplanes. As long as this supremacy holds good, Britain can't be invaded." And when that battle was won, Seversky was again alone in drawing a long-range moral: "Unless Germany corrects the basic mistakes of its aeronautical equipment, it hasn't a chance of winning this war."

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Winning nations tend to glorify the methods and weapons that brought them victory. France at the end of World War I, flushed with triumph in the trenches, pro-

ceeded to construct a super-colossal de luxe trench: the Maginot Line. It was an engineering marvel, embodying all the latest scientific gadgets. But it was still a trench: a

Before our entry into the war, few voices challenged the thesis that American naval power gave us supremacy in the Pacific. But Seversky was dismayed by this illusion of safety. "Neither the home grounds nor far-off colonies can be considered impregnable, or even defensible," he wrote in June 1941, "merely because a nation possesses magnificent sea power. If those areas are within bombing distance of the enemy, they are vulnerable." Pearl Harbor settled that argument. Long before the war, Seversky warned that daylight bombardment without escort fighters would fail. In line with this contention, he had designed, built and flown such an escort plane. His warning was not heeded. After the sacrifice of many men and machines, however, we resorted to the fighter-escort procedure which gave us air victory. The pattern of Seversky's striking prevision held true throughout the war.

Today his principles have the ring of elementary truths. The very men who laughed at them now apply them as a matter of course, often in the very words in which Seversky first formulated them. But they sounded far-fetched and revolutionary when he was first popularizing them.

Born into a military family in Russia, Major Seversky was graduated from the Imperial Naval Academy in 1914. During World War I, despite the loss of his right leg in his first aerial engagement, he became a combat ace. After the 1917 revolution he was sent to the United States as a member of a Naval Aviation Mission. When the Bolsheviks seized power, he decided to remain here. Though an alien, he was appointed Consulting Engineer for the Air Service and, after he became an American citizen, was commissioned a major in the Air Corps Specialists Reserve.

In 1947 he was awarded the Medal of Merit for his "inestimable contribution to the final victory" while serving as Special Consultant to the Secretary of War. Six months later, when he received the International Harmon Trophy for the second time, the citation, read by the President, praised his "courageous labors in arousing our democratic public opinion in support of a modern and adequate Air Force."

It is likely that these further arguments of Seversky's for what he considers true air power will again evoke heated attacks. But in the light of his record, there can be no doubt of the soundness of Secretary of War Patterson's statement:

"Whatever Major Seversky has to say on air power and its future is worth the attention of all patriotic citizens interested in national defense."

steel-and-concrete monument to the tragic belief that any new war would be as static as the last one.

True, a young officer named Charles de Gaulle foresaw the advent

of mobile and motorized warfare that would nullify super-trenches. But would France listen? Its illusions of safety were confirmed by such newly haloed heroes as Foch,

Joffre, Pétain, Gamelin. To question their military wisdom at that time seemed close to treason.

The implications of the Maginot Line — a symbol of futility — have not been fully grasped. We Americans are at this very moment perpetrating a tragedy of the same order, for the same reasons, with the blessings of our own haloed heroes of recent victory. Having won the last war with triphibious task forces, Army-Navy-Air teams, we are proceeding to build super-colossal task forces which will embody all the latest technological innovations. Little gliders are being displaced by big gliders; tanks by super-tanks. Assault barges firing primitive rockets are being replaced by super-barges firing V-2 rockets. Escort carriers are to be replaced by gigantic floating islands at a quarter of a billion dollars a throw. In America today, as in France a generation ago, legislators are overawed by the prestige of the five-star generals and admirals who delivered victory.

We need to be reminded that *the triphibious strategy of World War II was an improvisation forced upon us by failure to provide air power with sufficient range to strike at the vitals of Japan from bases already in our possession*. Such air power was technically possible but had been arbitrarily brushed aside by surface-minded planners. The land-sea-air team was an emergency device for carrying short-range aviation step by step, island by island, within striking distance of the ultimate target.

Indeed, as the range of available aviation was extended, those steps could be stretched, by-passing intermediary islands where the enemy was entrenched. Every enlargement of range thus paid off in lives saved. In the final stage, our Superforts were planted within direct striking reach of Japan proper. At that point their surface teammates became in effect mere bystanders, as air power undertook the systematic demolition of the enemy sources of power.

Air power finished the job — and this is the key to an understanding of the events — with great Nipponese armies on the home islands and on the Asiatic mainland still intact, but impotent. Air power finished the job with a fantastic mass of American land and sea forces likewise intact and useless.

As late as June 21, 1943, General Marshall explained in a speech that "your adversary may be hammered to his knees by bombing but he will recover unless the knockout blow is delivered by the army." Fortunately he was wrong. The knockout blow was delivered by air power, sparing perhaps a million American and Japanese lives. Our actual "invasion" came *after* the surrender. A handful of American officers landed and took control of a country still possessing millions of fresh troops.

Most civilians could grasp the obvious lessons of this picture. But professional surface-strategists, innocent of the aeronautical facts of life, were bewildered. With few exceptions, they emerged from the war

sold to the hilt on the triphibious team for securing outlying bases. They still remain blind to strategy based on victory without the orthodox showdown by foot soldiers on a battlefield. We are still witnessing the Maginot Line mentality at work. The current program of defense through balanced forces operating from a chain of bases means only one thing: *the perpetuation of the methods of the last war*.

Our projected 70-group Air Force is built around 20 groups of medium bombers of the B-29 and B-50 types — which is to say, around a 5000-mile flying range, or 2000-mile striking radius. (Striking radius is about 40 percent of total flying range.) It provides for only *five* groups of long-range B-36 bombers, which have an effective flying range of 10,000 miles — with current modifications promising 13,000 miles — enough to blast any target in Eurasia from our own continent. Why do we thus continue to put our faith in an old-fashioned and technologically outmoded air force?

The telltale fact about the 2000-mile radius is that it requires an array of overseas bases. Bases in turn call for large land and sea forces to hold and supply them. The over-all military pattern thus remains unchanged. Whether we have 70 groups or 700, the complex setup on the surface remains indispensable. The more air power of this limited reach, the larger the land and sea forces required to make it operative.

*Before the last war we had built*

*and flown 82-ton aircraft with a flying range of some 8000 miles. Did we put them into production to fight the war? Not at all! Instead, we produced 20-ton aircraft with a flying range of 2000 miles. Today we have a few bombers of 150 tons with a flying range of 10,000 miles. But what are we building? Seventy-ton bombers with a flying range of 5000 miles (combat striking range, 2000) — just short enough to rule out transoceanic offensives.*

True, we are now resorting to air-refueling and other tricks to extend the range of action. These will work under conditions of surprise, but I am convinced that sustained offensives cannot be maintained without planes of inter-hemispheric range. One can understand the present face-lifting improvisations by our Air Force. Its leaders have no alternative. Aircraft of inadequate range have been imposed upon them by military planners hell-bent on fighting from distant bases guaranteed by huge armies and navies.

The arguments advanced today for holding back the "extreme" planes are the same as those we heard when the 82-ton B-19 seemed "extreme." The real explanation for freezing our strategy at the 2000-mile radius is not technological but psychological. Military minds of the old stamp cannot admit the possibility of war without showdown land and sea battles, spearheaded by Marines and supported by complex supply lines all over the world.

I do not hesitate to challenge the

2000-mile radius restriction. It is destined to join the Maginot Line in the limbo of outlived military notions. Even if a war should begin on this basis, it would inevitably be transformed into an all-out contest of inter-hemispheric dimensions before a decision could be scored. The logic of air power means an air force with enough range to strike from its own continent. *The nation that is first in preparing for inter-continental aerial warfare will win the next war.*

The United States should begin now. Tomorrow may be too late.

THE ADVENT of the atomic bomb does not alter this picture. The bomb is not a new military force, in the sense that the Army, Navy and the Air Force are military forces. It is a new and horribly destructive explosive, as yet of finite scope. Before it can score a decision, it must be delivered, like any other explosive, by one or a combination of military forces to the right target at the right time. Thus it is not the stockpile of atomic bombs that will decide the issue, but superior means of delivery — and that means air power. *Far from nullifying the art of war, the atom bomb puts a higher premium on correct strategy.*

There are two possible strategies open to us. One, when air power can deliver the atom bomb only when provided with overseas bases. This demands a large army and a great navy. The national effort is split three ways so that none of the forces attains its maximum potential.

Two, when air power has sufficient range to deliver the atom bomb directly from this continent, without need of overseas bases. This reduces our Army and Navy to a minimum and allows us to put most of the national effort into the Air Force so that it attains its maximum potential.

There is nothing novel about the first strategic plan. That is how the last war was fought, and it is, unfortunately, the strategy underlying our present plans for national defense. But suppose that Soviet Russia possessed similar air bases in Cuba or Greenland — how long would they remain Russian after the start of hostilities? Obviously, we could kill them off by throwing against them the full weight of our bombing power. We would operate from the source of our strength and supplies, while the enemy could use only one segment of his and would have to depend on thousands of miles of vulnerable supply lines. The idea that Russia could hold Cuba or Greenland is fantastic.

But is it any less fantastic when we propose to hold bases on the periphery of the Eurasian continent? Our projected air outposts in North Africa, Europe, the Near East and the Far East are within striking range of Soviet air power. Most of these bases could be attacked not only by long-range bombers but also by great masses of short-range tactical planes, a type in which quantity rather than quality is the vital consideration. And we know that German and Russian factories are now

producing thousands of tactical planes. The Soviet leaders can be expected to use these planes ruthlessly, considering them as expendable as so many shells. Finally, to hold these bases and keep them supplied would also mean challenging the 300 divisions of the Red Army.

The use of outer bases, for initial surprise action is possible. But their permanent control for sustained strategic offensive is the stuff of dreams. Being within the orbit of the total hostile air potential, these bases will be captured or demolished, paralyzing the strategy dependent upon them. The ultimate decision will be postponed until we are ready to use long-range strategic aviation based on our own continent. Unless the enemy is ready with that kind of air power first. . . .

Everything we have said about fixed bases applies a hundredfold to the floating bases called aircraft carriers. The only advantage they claim is mobility. But maneuverability reckoned in hundreds of miles becomes meaningless against aircraft covering thousands of miles. How a ship sailing 600 miles a day can evade detection by planes flying 600 miles an hour the admirals haven't explained.

In the last war carriers could not operate in the Mediterranean or North Sea within reach of the German *Luftwaffe*. Enlarging a carrier merely provides the foe with a larger target. The 80,000-ton floating islands on which our Navy has set its hopes are military monstrosities.

They will be quarter-of-a-billion-dollar expendables, good at most for one limited sneak assault before they are annihilated. And their planes will be inferior to equivalent planes operating from the ground. I have no doubt that when military history is written these marine mastodons will be cited as a prime example of strategic folly.

If this strategy of carriers, overseas bases and short-range aviation is allowed to stand, we would be called upon, in the event of war, to produce simultaneously the world's largest army, navy and air force, while dividing our aeronautical effort between strategic and tactical planes, both in maximum numbers. Since our resources are not infinite, we could not hope for absolute superiority in any one of these forces. And, according to Government figures, we would be putting ten dollars into surface elements for every dollar put into the skies. We don't need a calculating machine to realize that we are here dealing with strategy which, if it is to have the magnitude for victory over the world's No. 1 land power, would bankrupt a nation ten times as rich as the United States.

A recent press summary of the views of our high command stated that "the United States can develop overwhelming superiority in the air and at sea, but will find it hard to compete with Russia's land power." The allusion to sea superiority is frivolous. Soviet Russia, a self-contained and blockade-proof conti-

nent, has no navy, needs no navy, fears no navy. But if a contest on land is dangerous, if superiority in the air can be made overwhelming, why do we earmark a third of America's man power and resources to face an admittedly superior land force and the near-certainty of defeat? Why allocate another third to futile and irrelevant sea power? Why not convert the whole potential to the force recognized as our realm of supremacy — the Air Force?

• LET US have the intellectual clarity and daring to break with the past. *For a small fraction of the cost of conquering, maintaining and supplying bases for short-range aviation, we can buy long-range aviation that nullifies the need for those bases and the huge surface forces that go with them.*

The Air Force stated recently that "the possession of the B-36 will make it possible for us to operate against a possible aggressor anywhere in the world" from bases on the North American continent. Why, then, is the bulk of our money being put into 20 groups of medium bombers, while only five groups of the B-36 type are projected?

The answer is that our defense policy is shaped by men reared on surface concepts. Critics warn that the "huge, unwieldy" B-36 will be shot down. Of course some will. The medium-range bombers we plan to send from overseas bases will also be shot down. War without combat is a pipe dream.

We face today a crucial choice.

Either we continue to divide our national potential three ways for land-sea-air operations tied to distant bases or we channel our strategy boldly into the skies for direct operations, with command of the whole air ocean as the objective.

That is the only strategy that will serve as a real deterrent to aggressors. It is the natural product of our way of life. No one will be able to challenge that kind of force. In order to create it — and more important, to exercise it properly — the challenger would have to possess talents equivalent to ours, and to acquire those talents he would have to adopt our way of life, there will be no need for war.

The change called for is a bold reversal of prevailing concepts. Nothing less than an aroused public opinion can accomplish this. The pressure of the American people on their representatives in Congress can force revision of obsolete strategic plans.

The decision must be made quickly. Only the nation as a whole can make it. Our people must choose between outmoded methods and an historic opportunity to win *peace through air power.*

FOR A PICTURE of our *present* air-power potentialities, operating from some 50 air bases abroad that are available to the United States and England, the reader is referred to the article "The Facts Which Must Prevent War," in last month's issue of the Digest. This statement represented the views of several of the ablest top men in the U. S. Air Force.



## The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met

By Benedict Thielen

Novelist, short-story writer; author of "Friday at Noon," "Lost Men," etc.

His name was Maurice and he happened to be a Frenchman. Nationality doesn't matter. Certain qualities of his were typically French, but the sum of things that made him could have been gathered anywhere. When I first met him he was a chauffeur, driving an enormous Renault for some rich Americans who had rented a villa in the south of France. A little man, with a drooping black mustache which gave him a deceptive air of melancholy, he was discreetly correct in his neat dark-blue uniform, appearing automatically when needed and fading out of the

picture when his work was done. It was not long before I realized how often he was needed, how often I heard the phrase "Ask Maurice, he'll know." And he did know, whether it was how to get the water heater to stop acting as though it were on the verge of exploding; what to do about the mosquitoes; where to dine.

For a moment he would stand silent, lost in thought. If the answer did not come to him immediately he would say, "Wait till I find the *combine*." This is a hard word to translate. It is more than "solution"; it carries overtones of guile, a suggestion of devious, though by no means